Ambassador Berry's Remarks for the
Threatened Species Summit
Melbourne Zoo
July 16, 2015

It is a real honor and a great pleasure to be here with you today.

One of my priorities as Ambassador is working with people who care to protect the global environment. As a former director of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Smithsonian National Zoo, I have been working on conserving our world's precious wildlife for a long time. Of all the many joys I have in this job, getting to enjoy and learn about Australia's amazing wildlife is my greatest one. After all, Australia has far more biodiversity than the United States.

The news is not good for the animal world -- or for us.

The World Wildlife Fund estimates that we have lost half of all the world's animals since 1970. Biologist E.O. Wilson estimated that one half of Earth's higher life forms will be threatened with extinction by 2100 if we don't act. Not since the time of the dinosaurs have we seen a comparable rate of species loss.

If this is where we are headed, it is a worse than failing grade on our conservation report card. Not only is this a tremendous blow to biodiversity, it is a sad commentary on how we treat our planet and our fellow creatures. This is not something we can be proud of. It should serve as a wake-up call for the public and for our governments.

We are trying to do our part: Secretary Kerry recently directed our State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement to make wildlife trafficking a priority.

And President Obama and Secretary Kerry have reaffirmed that environmental concerns -- especially climate change and our oceans -- are at the forefront of our foreign policy agenda.

Through the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, we are committed to using every tool possible to address environmental challenges. For the first time, an international trade agreement will make environmental commitments fully enforceable.

I want to congratulate my Australian friends for appointing the country's first Threatened Species Commissioner, Gregory Andrews, who is here with us today. What a tremendous step!

Animals across the world face serious threats to their survival. But with our help, these species can – and do – recover and thrive. When we throw our hearts and minds into conservation, when we persevere, we can accomplish anything.

What I have seen from people like you – people who are in the trenches daily – gives me a great deal of hope that we will avoid the worst case scenarios.

Every day, I see hopeful news – Western Quolls reintroduced into the Flinders Ranges, the ongoing work with Regent Honey-eaters in Victoria and New South Wales, work with Western Swamp Tortoise and other species in Western Australia, and the reintroduction of bettongs and bilbies throughout the country – but we cannot rest on our laurels.

Now more than ever, it is incumbent on us to continue to innovate, to think about conservation techniques in fresh ways, and to explore new uses for technology. We need to reach across disciplines and across borders.

When I was at the National Zoo, I worked with the late conservation biologist Dr. Devra Kleiman. She exemplified all of these qualities. Devra was working to save the golden lion tamarin from extinction. When she started, there were only a few hundred in the wild. There were some in zoos, but they were isolated.

Devra was determined to save these little guys. So she got the zoos to work together for the first time. More tamarins were bred.

The ultimate goal was to reintroduce them into the wild. Her first try failed miserably. When released in Brazil, all the tamarins died.

Devra changed her approach. She realized that the monkeys had no idea how to live in the wild. So she let some tamarins loose in Rock Creek Park – smack in the middle of Washington, DC. They learned to dodge owls and peregrine falcons, and find food and shelter – everything that an animal would need to survive in the wild – while still having a safety net in the form of zookeepers.

When Devra took those monkeys to Brazil, they not only survived, they thrived, and bred like rabbits. Today, there is a healthy population in the wild.

Devra succumbed to cancer a few years ago, but her contribution to the survival of this species was invaluable. She fought for the tamarins until the day she died.

Her dedication is not unusual among conservationists.

Since I've been here in Australia, I've seen similar commitment. I've also seen a willingness to try new things among those who are working to preserve Australia's tremendous natural wonders. I have yet to hear someone say "it's too hard" or "it's impossible." Instead, the prevailing feeling has been "let's give it a shot and see what happens."

There is a reason that Australia is in a leadership position in conservation and management. Australia's conservation community is showing the world the way forward.

But this is nothing new.

Australia was among the first countries in the world to establish a marine conservation area. Today, Australia has the largest network of marine reserves in the world, covering about one third of Australian waters.

The Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora [CITES] -- one of the largest and oldest conservation and sustainable use agreements in the world -- is currently led by John Scanlon, an Australian.

You are leaders in the control of invasive species like foxes and cats over areas that are almost unimaginably vast. I am impressed by the efforts being undertaken in each Australian State and Territory in protecting your unique wildlife. Special "hats off" for Minister Jacobs' work called "Western Shield" and to New South Wales for launching a radically new partnership between the government and NGOs to reintroduce extinct species in New South Wales.

In the NGO sector, I am also impressed by the work of the Australian Wildlife Conservancy, which manages more than 3 million hectares (7.4 million acres) across Australia – an area about the size of Belgium. In doing so, they are protecting more than 500 native bird species and more than 170 native animal species.

During my visit to AWC's Mornington Wilderness Camp, I was impressed by their efforts to restore native wildlife over massive expanses of territory. Fencing off large tracts of land and removing invasive species has been considered impractical in some places. Species there are coming back, proving that this model can work. And best of all, it may work in other places, including the United States.

All of this suggests that while the situation is dire for many species, it is not too late. Nature's powers of recovery are impressive and she only needs a little help from us to produce amazing results. We've seen this sort of success in the United States as well.

Black-footed ferrets were considered extinct in the wild until a rancher found a small colony of 20 animals in 1981. With so few animals, prospects for survival were grim. Scientists had to make a tough choice: let them go extinct, or start a captive a breeding program.

The captive breeding program was hugely successful. Starting in 1991, ferrets were reintroduced in eight states and Mexico. At the National Zoo, we discovered that ferrets exposed to outdoor burrows with prairie dogs survived better in the wild, so we created special habitats to prepare them for release.

Today, more than 1,200 ferrets live in four separate self-sustaining populations –a remarkable recovery.

Grey wolves reintroduced in Yellowstone in 1995, have recovered and are having a positive impact on the environment. This also required decades of work – starting in 1966 – in order to get buy-in from stakeholders like ranchers. More than 150,000 people made comments on the draft recovery plan. A "wolf compensation fund" was set up to compensate ranchers whose livestock was killed. The lengthy process minimized conflict and hard feelings.

As the wolf population increases, the ecosystem in Yellowstone Park – which had been devastated by the loss of wolves and beavers and the rising elk population – has also improved. Without a predator like the wolf, elk herds eliminated the stands of cottonwoods and willow trees that beavers need for survival. These trees were also needed to shade and cool streams for fish populations, including the Yellowstone cutthroat trout which migrates to spawn. Today, the elk population is down, beaver populations are up, and the cottonwood and willow stands are becoming healthier, leading to lower stream temperatures. This, along with major efforts to eradicate invasive lake trout, is helping bring back the cutthroat trout and other fish.

Most important, we have gained invaluable knowledge about what the removal – or return – of a single species does to an entire ecosystem.

Each of these stories offers lessons in how we can better conserve the animals with which we share our world. They offer lessons on how all parts of an ecosystem are tremendously important. Most of all, these stories offer us hope for the future. They demonstrate that, even when we think a species is extinct, we can bring it back from the brink.

But to reverse the global decline in biodiversity, we cannot be content, complacent, or conduct "business as usual." If conservation efforts are to be successful, we must adopt innovative approaches, be willing to try new technologies and delivery models, talk to other scientists, and share knowledge and information and best practices.

This is exactly what I see every day. I see Australians who are using drones to count orangutans in the wild. I see cooperative international efforts among zoos and scientists to save Tasmanian

Devils. I see amazing research that indicates that we are working hard – together – to get the job done.

Australia "abounds in Nature's gifts of beauty rich and rare." You are building on a vision and ideas that move us farther away from the cliff every day. Your forward thinking and willingness to embrace techniques that are difficult – some might say impossible – to implement serve as an inspiration to the rest of the world.

Aldo Leopold, one of America's pioneers in conservation and environmental ethics, once said:

We stand guard over works of art, but species representing the work of aeons are stolen from under our noses.

If we continue to work together and support our conservationists, scientists, and researchers, we can leave our children a world where the breathtaking diversity of flora and fauna aren't just in books or museums -- but in their natural habitats as well. We can leave our world richer and more abundant than it was given to us.

I congratulate Australia, Minister Hunt, Commissioner Andrews –and all of you who care – for working to achieve this. I applaud your leadership in creating a national effort to conserve your precious wildlife.

God bless you all!